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SUBJECT: Embassy Election Events a Hit with Kyrgyz Elites and Students

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11. (SBU) Summary: Embassy Bishkek hosted six public events November 5 to mark the U.S. presidential elections. The events took place at the Chief of Mission's Residence (CMR); the American Corners in Jalalabad, Kant, and Karakol; and the American Centers in Bishkek and Osh. Prominent opposition politicians attended the Ambassador's event. With the exception of the American Center in Bishkek, where the Consular Section hosted an event for American citizens, all events were geared to a Kyrgyz audience. End summary.

KYRGYZ VIP'S MARK U.S. ELECTIONS AT THE CMR

12. (SBU) The morning event at the Chief of Mission's Residence was an open house attended by about 50 local government officials, members of the diplomatic corps, NGO representatives, politically-engaged Kyrgyz elite, and the media. Elections in the Kyrgyz Republic are regarded as holidays, and many guests wished the Ambassador "Happy Holiday!" and "Congratulations on your elections!" even before the results were clear. Common questions had to do with the practice of color-coding states (red state/blue state) and the Electoral College system. Many of the guests were pleasantly surprised by the graciousness of Senator McCain's concession speech, with the Russian Ambassador commenting, "He is also a worthy man." Many guests insisted on staying for and appeared quite touched by Senator Obama's victory speech.

OPPOSITION POLITICIANS TAKE NOTE

13. (SBU) Omurbek Tekebayev, one of the most prominent Kyrgyz opposition leaders, accepted the Ambassador's invitation to the event. Tekebayev rubbed shoulders with many government officials, and also eagerly collected materials (in Kyrgyz and Russian) about the U.S. electoral system. His assistants also took note of displays on the elections process. Roza Otunbayeva, a former foreign minister and currently a parliamentarian representing the Social Democratic Party also attended, and made the rounds of other politicians in attendance. The Ombudsman informed the Ambassador of his interest in building a solid relationship with the Embassy. The opposition politicians seemed appreciative of the Ambassador's

invitation to the event.

#### IN THE SHADOW OF THE RUSSIAN AIRBASE

14. (SBU) In the city of Kant, located twenty miles outside of Bishkek and site of the Russian airbase, Embassy staff hosted an event for approximately 25 local students, teachers, and elected officials at the American Corner. With CNN predicting the winner state-by-state in the background, Embaff's spoke with guests about the Electoral College, the differences between the two candidates and their parties, and the fundamentals of the election process. Two Kant City Council members recently elected on October 5 fueled the discussion by comparing the Kyrgyz and U.S. electoral process. The council members were quite inquisitive about polling stations, ballots, and the overall election process. They admitted that the current Kyrgyz system was extensively flawed and hoped to learn from Americans about the importance of transparency as a weapon to eliminate corruption.

#### KARAKOL EVENT IS STANDING ROOM ONLY

15. (SBU) Spilling out into the corridor, over sixty students, teachers, NGO representatives and local journalists gathered in the American Corner in Karakol. Embassy staff, joined by six Peace Corps volunteers, fielded questions on electoral process and differences between the U.S. political parties. The students in attendance were the best students from the various institutions and universities near Karakol, so the questions were nuanced and the students were surprisingly well-informed about the U.S. presidential campaign. When asked what they expected from an Obama administration, several students expressed the hope that the United States would be more "peaceful" and would work more closely in cooperation with Kyrgyzstan and other countries in the region.

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#### ENTHUSIASM IN SOUTHERN KYRGYZSTAN

16. (SBU) Close to 30 Kyrgyz students, teachers, and local media attended an election discussion at the American Center at Osh State University. Pol-Econ Chief and USAID Society and State Advisor outlined the U.S. election process and took questions from the students and press. While there were a number of questions about the two-party system, the campaign process, and the Electoral College, attendees were particularly interested in whether the results of the election would affect U.S. foreign relations, including the relationship between the U.S. and Kyrgyzstan. Other areas of interest for the students included personal wealth of the candidates, life of ex-presidents and race relations in the U.S. At the American Corner in Jalalabad, the Cultural Affairs Officer held an event for over 50 Kyrgyz students. Questions posed were similar to those at the other student events.

17. (SBU) Comment: While there was little coverage of the U.S. presidential election campaigns in Kyrgyz mainstream media, Kyrgyz youth proved to be surprisingly well-informed about the U.S. presidential race. Perhaps it was a self-selecting crowd, but their interest in, and knowledge of, U.S. politics should be credited to the American Corners and Centers, which provide free internet access to students. Since Kyrgyzstan's independence, this was Embassy Bishkek's largest U.S. election outreach effort.

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